Netwatch

By Jim Carroll

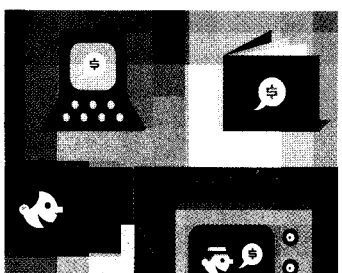
Your guide to business & accounting on the Internet

Be vigilant about security

History has taught us: never underestimate the amount of money, time and effort someone will expend to thwart a security system. It's always better to assume the worst." That quote comes from an article posted on the website of a computer hacker known as Fyodor.

There is no doubt that information security has become a complex issue. When you link millions of computers worldwide, toss in different technologies from various companies and new computer code that is full of bugs, you have the potential for some serious problems.

Now consider that most businesses invest in a variety of productivity-enhancing systems with an increasing number of interorganizational transactions. Go one step further and add to the mix the fact that some people like to break into computer systems for the fun of it. Then figure in the risk of terrorism, and you have the opportunity for mayhem.



That's why we CAs need to be cognizant of ongoing and emerging security issues, whether we are the chief financial or chief executive officer of a large organization or are providing business advisory services to clients. While we can't all be security experts, we need to be aware of the types of security challenges that envelop us and of new ways to deal with those challenges.

Why are there so many computer security problems? Hackers and crackers take advantage of security holes that exist in much of the software we use throughout our working and personal lives. (Hackers are the lesser of the two evils, in that their goal is not to wreak havoc or cause destruction. The same cannot be said of crackers.)

Hackers and crackers also take advantage of the fact that people and businesses are relatively lazy when it comes to computer security issues. Certainly, most companies could have avoided the recent Slammer virus, which struck in January, if they had applied a Microsoft security patch released nine months earlier. Unfortunately, many computer companies continue to release shoddy computer code that is full of security weaknesses, and organizations fail to upgrade their software with the latest security patches.

Last but not least, as we march forward into an increasingly complex world, many people don't truly appreciate that the foundation for our future is, to a degree, being built on top of flimsy infrastructures.

That's why you should take some time to attune yourself to current and future security problems. The Cert Coordination Center provides the most up-to-date information on serious attacks and problems as they occur and how you can fix them.

Far more interesting, though, is the Risks Digest, since it regularly highlights and analyses the many risks that can occur in a technological society, thus providing a long-term view of the security challenges we face. It's been running for almost 18 years online and has an impressive track record.

Finally, for a more PC-oriented approach, try out the security section in ZDNet, which contains regularly updated information on viruses, security problems and other weaknesses.

Jim Carroll, FCA, is a well-known speaker, author and columnist. Reach him at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com or log on to his website at www.jimcarroll.com

SITES ON SECURITY

Cert Coordination Center www.cert.org

Risks Digest http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/Risks

ZDNet www.zdnet.com
(click on the News tab, then the Security tab)

SecurityFocus www.securityfocus.com

Computerworld www.computerworld.com/topics
(click on the Security tab)